

'Veronica's Room' Stylish Dead-End Thriller

By DOUGLAS WATT

In the first of the two short acts that make up "Veronica's Room," which came to the Music Box last night, Ira Levin has a pretty slick thriller going for him, and we're all eyes and ears. But in the second act, he's got to work his and our way out of the puzzle and he can't. Not satisfactorily, anyway.

Instead, he arrives at the point he's been trying to bring us around to from the start, only after so much shifting of gears in the last 10 minutes or so—switches of identity, actually—that we're left bewilderedly wondering how we got there, and why.

I'm still not sure just exactly what happened in that musty bed-sitting room with the high ceiling, fine old furniture and barred windows in a mansion outside Boston. But I am sure that in a thriller, whether the fun is in watching the victim extricate himself or in the shock (less fun) of finding him hopelessly enmeshed, the big trick is to make everything seem plausible. In "Veronica's Room," Levin has made the mistake of getting himself in too deep.

The Surface Picture

I am giving away absolutely nothing by telling you that the play presents us with a young couple who, on their first date together, have been picked up in a restaurant by a married couple, caretakers for an estate, who induce the youngsters to go home with them so that the girl can pose as a 1935 invalid named Veronica.

It is to be an act of mercy staged for the benefit of Veronica's deranged sister, and the girl eventually agrees to the scheme after both her objections and those of her date are overcome.

Needless to say, things are not at all what they seem, and as the second act begins (at the very point where the first act ended,



Arthur Kennedy & Eileen Heckart

making "Veronica's Room" a long one-acter, in fact) a couple of the people involved have changed character completely.

We remain all eyes and ears, and even laugh now and then at a couple of snappy remarks delivered by Eileen Heckart with her familiar deadly accuracy. But the play falls apart before our eyes with Levin's last desperate bursts of invention, and we've guessed where it's leading (nowhere, really) before Levin has seemed to.

Too bad, too, because the dialogue is crisp and the acting and direction are smart, indeed. Miss Heckart and Arthur Kennedy as her fellow conspirator are first-rate, and Kipp Osborne is interesting as the string-bean boy friend.

It is a small wood animal named Regina Baff, though—a Boston U coed with so ripe a

'VERONICA'S ROOM'

Play by Ira Levin, produced by Morton Gottlieb at the Music Box, Oct. 25, 1973.

THE CAST

The Woman _____ Eileen Heckart
The Man _____ Arthur Kennedy
The Girl _____ Regina Baff
The Young Man _____ Kipp Osborne

vocabulary that Miss Heckart is led to remark, "That's the way they talk in '73. Sort of makes you want to die in '72, doesn't it?" — who captures us completely.

The victim of the piece, Miss Baff, is spunky, touching, adorable, pathetic, and wonderfully alive. I'll miss her, though I won't tell you why.

Ellis Rabb has staged this glossy shocker with smooth authority until things get so out

of hand at the finish. And Douglas W. Schmidt's towering and richly appointed three-cornered set, Nancy Potts' costumes and John Gleason's lighting all marvelously set the tone for an evening of mystery.

For a while in "Veronica's Room," Levin seems bent on figuring out for us what happened to those Boston coeds who met with foul play while hitchhiking. But once he brings up incest, and moves on to some Jamesian suggestions of latent evil, Levin begins to lose the game, and with it, us. Good try, though.

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